

Condolences sent by ICFI sections on the death of Wije Dias, Sri Lankan SEP chairman

1 August 2022

Here we are publishing condolences sent by sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International on the death of Wije Dias, chairman of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka. David North, chairman of the SEP in the US delivered his tribute to Wije Dias via the internet to the funeral gathering held at Borella Cemetery in Colombo on Saturday evening.

From the Socialist Equality Party in Britain:

Comrades,

All members of the Socialist Equality Party in Britain join with you in mourning the passing of our dear comrade Wije Dias.

Wije will be mourned by workers and young people across the world. A deep sense of loss is felt by all of us, and we extend our heartfelt sympathy to Wije's son Keerthi and his family.

Our grief is tempered by a justified sense of pride that our movement was led by such a principled, noble and extraordinary fighter for Trotskyism. Following the split with the national opportunists of the British Workers Revolutionary Party in 1985–86, comrade Wije was able to play a leading role within our international party, including as national secretary of the Sri Lankan section for more than three decades.

In everything he did, Wije brought to bear a vast political experience, a lifetime's study of Marxism and of Sri Lankan, South Asian and world history. Anyone privileged to hear him speak will know what is meant by the phrase "political authority."

He sought to explain, patiently and clearly, to educate. To appeal not only to the heart but to the head, knowing that the success of the socialist revolution depends on raising the political consciousness of the advanced workers and youth and developing them as cadre.

In discussions within party bodies, formulating international policy, or in private conversation, he was someone to listen to and learn from. And yes, he was witty—especially when puncturing the pretensions and conceits of the political enemies of the working class.

Trotsky made the crucial observation, "Ideas that enter the mind under fire remain there securely and forever." That was certainly the case with Wije. In a December 6, 2018, interview with the *Daily Mirror* marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Revolutionary Communist League, Wije explained how he was won to the International Committee of the Fourth International.

Two things stand out: the political impact of the "Great Betrayal" by the Lanka Sama Samaja Party in joining Sirimavo Bandaranaike's bourgeois coalition in 1964 and the fact that Wije and a small group of young co-thinkers responded to that betrayal as socialist internationalists.

Wije was then a member of the LSSP (Revolutionary) faction. He explained, "At the Peradeniya University library we came across the newsletter of the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), led by Gerry Healy. We read Healy's pamphlet, 'Ceylon—the great betrayal', and a significant sentence in it was: 'The origins of the coalition cannot be found in Colombo, but only in Paris'. Paris was the headquarters of the International Secretariat of the Fourth International (FI), which was dominated by Pabloites. It was their

politics that had guided the LSSP into the coalition. And the LSSP (R) leaders opposed discussing this issue because they wanted to follow the same Pabloite line."

Wije and his comrades broke away from the LSSP (R) and, thanks to the guidance of comrade Wilfred 'Spike' Pereira, began an intensive study of the history of the FI and most especially the issues raised by the reunification of the US Socialist Workers Party with the Pabloites in 1963. This led to the founding of the RCL as a section of the ICFI under the leadership of comrade Keerthi Balasuriya.

This principled approach, rooted in the revolutionary internationalism of Trotskyism and a profound respect for Marxist theory, shaped Wije's long history as a political leader and is why he could communicate complex ideas so clearly and convincingly.

Just one example. At the end of the *Daily Mirror* interview he is asked, "Can a small working class in a small country exert much influence over global happenings?" Wije replied with a simplicity borne of political clarity, stating of the ICFI, "We are a fraternal organisation of all sections of the working class, whatever language, culture or nationality... We are equals, and we are fighting for social equality. We live in a small country, but we are a part of the world, no less than the US. There are global conditions under which we all live. The international unity of the working class must be achieved on a socialist basis to come out of this very dangerous situation, with a developing world war, right wing movements, and dictatorships all over the world."

Comrade Wije Dias is irreplaceable, and his loss is deeply felt. But the true measure of a political leader is what they leave behind.

Wije's legacy, which guarantees his place in the history of the struggle for socialism, is two-fold. There are his extensive writings, which will contribute to the education of the working class throughout the world, above all in Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution. And there are the cadre Wije led and developed. This cadre and the historical perspective they embody is the necessary leadership of the revolutionary struggles now emerging in Sri Lanka and internationally.

We go forward together in the struggle that comrade Wije dedicated his life to preparing.

Chris Marsden

National Secretary – SEP in Britain

From the Socialist Equality Party in Germany:

Dear Comrades,

On behalf of the *Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei*, the German section of the ICFI, we extend to you our heartfelt condolences on the death of Wije Dias, the longtime general secretary of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka and its precursor, the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL).

Comrade Wije will live on in the consciousness of the international working class as someone who devoted his entire adult life to its liberation and the struggle for socialism. Since joining the Trotskyist movement sixty years ago, he has fought tirelessly and under the most difficult conditions for the perspective of world socialist revolution.

But Wije will also be remembered as an outstanding man and comrade.

His impressive stature, his powerful deep voice, his oratorical talent and his unwavering sense of humor set him sharply apart from the vacillating characters who set the tone in pseudo-leftist groups.

The early years of Wije's political life were marked by the historic betrayal of the LSSP, which stabbed a powerful working-class uprising in the back in 1964 and joined the capitalist government of the Sinhala-chauvinist SLFP. Wije was among the young Trotskyists who fought this historic betrayal and founded the Revolutionary Communist League in 1968 as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI.

Wije remained faithful to the internationalist and socialist principles that he defended at that time throughout his life. We came to know him personally during the period of the split with the British Workers Revolutionary Party. The latter had been trying for years to destroy the Sri Lankan section because it stood in the way of its unprincipled alliances with bourgeois nationalists—but it did not succeed. In the struggle against the WRP renegades, the RCL, then led by Keerthi Balasuriya, played the leading role behind the American Workers League.

When Comrade Keerthi died unexpectedly in 1987 at the age of 39, Comrade Wije took over responsibility for the Sri Lankan section. Since then, we have had the opportunity to work closely with him at numerous ICFI meetings, many of which were held in Germany.

In 1988, Wije participated in the German section's two-week summer camp, where he spoke on the theory of permanent revolution and the lessons of Sri Lanka. This remained an unforgettable experience for the participants of the summer camp. Wije not only possessed the ability to explain the historical and political experiences in an excellent way, as the leader of the Sri Lankan section he also embodied them.

Wije played an important role in training comrades from Sri Lanka living in European exile, who had broken with Tamil nationalism and joined the ICFI.

In 1991, Wije delivered a speech at the World Conference of Workers against Imperialist War and Colonialism, which ICFI had convened in Berlin. Afterwards he spent several days in discussion with Tamil comrades in Germany and France. In the following years, too, he regularly traveled to Stuttgart, Essen and Paris for discussions after meetings of the ICFI.

On his last visit to Europe, Wije spoke in Paris in 2007 at a public memorial meeting for Comrade Senthil Ravee, who had died in a tragic car accident. Drawing on Senthil's biography, who had grown up among tea plantation workers, Wije spoke to more than a hundred participants about the lessons of Sri Lanka's history, the consequences of the LSSP's betrayal, and the need to fight for working-class unity and socialist internationalism.

Wije's death is a great loss. We will miss him as a comrade and political leader. But his life, his writings and his speeches, and the Sri Lankan section he led for 35 years, are a source of inspiration and knowledge for the young generation of workers around the world who face the hopeless crisis of capitalism and are driven into fierce class struggles.

In Sri Lanka, the significance of Wije's life and work is particularly evident. The SEP's struggle for a Democratic and Socialist Congress of Workers and Rural Masses is the only viable answer to the preparations of a dictatorship by the ruling class, which wants to impose a brutal IMF austerity dictate on the impoverished masses.

For the Socialist Equality Party,

Ulrich Rippert and Peter Schwarz

From the Socialist Equality Party in Australia:

Dear comrades,

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) please accept our very deepest condolences to all the comrades in the SEP in Sri Lanka on the death of comrade Wije Dias.

His life-long struggle to build the section of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Sri Lanka is an imperishable contribution to the resolution of the crisis of working-class leadership on the island and internationally.

Wije was one of the remarkable group of youth led by Keerthi Balasuriya who, together with Wilfred "Spike" Perera, established the Revolutionary Communist League (RCL) as the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in 1968. Under the guidance of the ICFI, they drew the essential political lesson that the betrayal of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which entered the bourgeois government of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in 1964, was the consequence of Pabloite opportunism.

The Pabloite conceptions denied both the revolutionary role of the working class and the necessity for the construction of the Fourth International against all those who would adapt to Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and the search for "other forces." In opposing the LSSP's betrayal, the RCL laid the political foundations for the SEP and the IC to chart an independent socialist road for the working class in the revolutionary struggles that have emerged in Sri Lanka over the past three months.

Wije took up the responsibilities of general secretary following the untimely death of Keerthi Balasuriya in 1987. As general secretary of the RCL/SEP for 34 years, comrade Wije fought for a principled, internationalist and revolutionary perspective against all forms of nationalism and communalism. His leadership of the party was undertaken under the most difficult conditions of the 30-year civil war that had erupted in 1983 in the wake of the LSSP's open abandonment of socialist internationalism.

Wije's political legacy is profound. He brought to bear his wide interest in history, deep understanding of the political forces in Sri Lanka and the Indian sub-continent and extensive knowledge of the strategic experiences of the international working class in developing the party's analysis and political initiatives.

Wije was central to the close collaboration that has developed between the Sri Lankan and Australian sections of the ICFI following the 1985–86 split with the opportunist leadership of the British WRP. He travelled here on many occasions. He was a modest and understated comrade with an easy smile and an infectious laugh, behind which lay a steely and determined dedication to the principles and program of the Trotskyist movement. He was a deeply cultured man and with a love of life in all its aspects. All of this informed the close working and personal relations that Wije developed with comrades in this section over decades. He will be keenly missed.

His loss will be felt by all his comrades in Sri Lanka and throughout the ICFI but his immense political contribution lives on in the young cadre and leadership whom he trained and educated.

With warmest fraternal greetings,

Cheryl Crisp

National Secretary of the SEP (Australia)

From the Socialist Equality Party in France:

Dear comrades and friends,

The *Parti de l'égalité socialiste* of France extends its deepest condolences to all the members of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka on the passing of Comrade Wije Dias. He was a great Trotskyist, a loving father and family man, and a leader of the Sri Lankan workers.

Comrade Wije was also a great leader of the international working class. In France and around the world, his work helped bring new generations of workers and youth to Trotskyism. His loss is keenly felt not only in Sri Lanka, but in Europe and around the world.

He and his comrades opposed the Pabloite degeneration of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which entered into capitalist government in 1964 in a Great Betrayal of the working class. This principled struggle, led by the late Comrade Keerthi Balasuriya, was the alternative for the working class to Sri Lankan capitalism's collapse into a fratricidal communal war between Sinhalese and Tamil. Wije embodied the struggle to unify the working class against communal war and the capitalist system.

Comrades in France first had the opportunity to work closely with Comrade Wije in 1988, after the untimely death of Comrade Keerthi. We were Tamil refugees who had fled Sri Lanka's civil war and sought political asylum in Europe.

Comrade Wije saw our support for the International Committee of the Fourth International as a great victory for Trotskyism. He visited Europe several times, holding long hours of discussions with us and dozens of our supporters as we broke with Tamil nationalism. He patiently explained again and again critical political issues in the struggle against Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism and Pabloism.

Key among those issues was the November 1987 statement jointly developed by the ICFI and its Sri Lankan section against the Indo-Lankan Treaty. Reviewing the class character of "armed struggle" movements, such as the Palestine Liberation Organization or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, he explained that the bourgeoisie in oppressed and backward countries is inherently incapable of carrying out the mobilization necessary to free their nation from imperialist oppression.

Only the ICFI could explain why the Indian intervention in Sri Lanka, promoted by the LTTE, ended in disaster for the Tamil workers and rural toilers. The Indian army turned on the workers, massacring and plundering the people. The ICFI explained that it was the product of the common opposition to a united revolutionary movement in the working class of the region's bourgeois governments, nationalist movements, and Stalinist parties.

Comrade Wije did not let himself be influenced by the LTTE's temporary military successes against the Indian army in the north of Sri Lanka. His words must today be recalled:

"It is true that the LTTE has been victorious temporarily, but it would be a grave mistake to think that it was a victory due to their firepower and that one can solve social and democratic problems with just weapons. The truth is that the Indian bourgeoisie, the Stalinists and the Indian Tamil nationalists propagandized the notorious Indian Army as the defenders of the Tamil people. This propaganda was disproved within weeks when the Indian Army invaded the North and East. The Sri Lankan Tamil people saw them as an occupying army. The LTTE temporarily exploited the widespread popular resentment against the Indian Army. That was the reason for their success. But the LTTE never attempted to mobilize the Sinhalese, Indian workers, and the oppressed masses against the conspiracy of the Indian and Sri Lankan rulers. It is impossible for them. Because the program of that movement is also to protect this exploitative system..."

After Stalinism consummated its betrayal of the international working class, dissolving the Soviet Union in 1991, Comrade Wije emphasized the need for us to turn to the European working class. He stressed that we had to build our party as the party of the working class.

He told us: "The struggle to overcome unresolved democratic issues in former colonial countries and the struggle for democratic rights under attack in capitalist developed countries are two sides of the same coin."

He often discussed with us Leon Trotsky's book *Whither France?* His struggle against the United Left Front built by the Pabloite LSSP gave him a deep insight into the politics of the French Popular Front. This alliance—of the French bourgeois Radical Party, the social-democrats, and the Stalinist Communist Party—sold out the May–June 1936 French general strike. This disarmed the workers, paving the way for the eruption of World War II in Europe and the Nazi occupation of France.

Comrade Wije tirelessly stressed with us the need to break the grip of the union bureaucracies and the Stalinist and Pabloite parties over the working class. He requested that *Whither France?* be translated into Tamil and published on the *World Socialist Web Site*.

The PES will present the Tamil translation of *Whither France?* on the WWSWS in memory of Comrade Wije.

Comrade Wije again played a leading role as the Sri Lankan SEP worked closely with its comrades in France to found the PES in 2016. SEP Assistant Secretary Deepal Jayasekera came to France to lecture on the founding of the Sri Lankan section in 1968. Comrade Wije was in close contact with Comrade Jayasekera and with us in these critical weeks in 2016.

The revolutionary mobilization of the workers this year against the Sri Lankan capitalist regime, with its reactionary executive presidency and unitary state, vindicated the perspective for which comrade Wije dedicated his life. The Rajapakse regime was toppled not by a national armed movement, but by an insurrectionary movement of workers and youth. It is part of a growing, international movement of the working class against imperialist war, the COVID-19 pandemic, and rising prices that are impoverishing the population.

Comrade Wije's political legacy and his immense accomplishments live on in the memory of his comrades around the world, and their fight to give Trotskyist revolutionary leadership to the struggles of the working class.

V. Gnana, PES Assistant National Secretary

A. Lantier, PES National Secretary

From the Socialist Equality Party in Canada:

On behalf of the Socialist Equality Party (Canada), I wish to add my voice to the many in Sri Lanka and around the world paying tribute today to our comrade, the late Wije Dias, and to extend condolences to his family and to the cadre of the SEP Sri Lanka—that is to those, with whom he worked so intimately for more than half-a-century in the fight for the emancipation of the working class.

Comrade Wije was the personification of political principle, above all the struggle for socialist internationalism and the political independence of the working class. As the statement the ICFI issued to mark his death observed: Wije "was unyielding in his defense of Marxist and Trotskyist principles because he had witnessed the catastrophic consequences—in the form of political disorientation, reaction and tragic loss of life—that result from their abandonment and betrayal."

I had the privilege of meeting and working with Comrade Wije. He had many remarkable qualities—passionate hatred for all manifestations of oppression, great intellectual curiosity, a caustic sense of humour with which he cut down to size the political hirelings of the ruling class, personal kindness, courage and determination. These traits helped propel him to revolutionary politics and to persist in the face of huge difficulties. Those created by the LSSP's foul betrayal; and later by the retreat and abandonment of permanent revolution by the very leaders of the British WRP who in an earlier period had played the critical role in clarifying Wije, Keerthi Balasuriya and the others who spearheaded the founding of the Sri Lankan section of the ICFI in 1968 as to the causes, import and implication of the "great betrayal."

But Wije's personality and exceptional qualities were leavened by and ultimately can only be understood within the context of the socialist internationalist program for which he fought and the development of its organizational expression, the ICFI.

Wije was rightly renowned for his abilities as an orator. He spoke with passion and authority. However his approach and style were the antithesis of that of the demagogues with which South Asia so abounds. Whether

speaking to plantation workers or in internal party deliberations his remarks were aimed at stirring the thinking of his audience, and informed by a vast knowledge of the history of the world socialist movement, western literature, and the history, politics, and culture of South Asia.

It is still shocking for me to use the words “were” and “was” when speaking of Wije, because he remained such a vibrant force in the life of our world movement till the very day he died. He will be sorely missed as a revolutionary leader, comrade and friend.

But Wije’s legacy lives on in you and the party he dedicated his life to building. Indeed, the principles for which Comrade Wije fought and the cadres he helped assemble and train are critical to providing revolutionary direction to the mass upsurge of the working class and oppressed masses now convulsing the island and to building the SEP and the ICFI as the world party of socialist revolution.

Keith Jones, SEP (Canada) National Secretary



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